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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the developmental stages and issues faced by lesbian and gay college students between the ages of 18 and 25. Over and above the developmental stages faced by all students, lesbian and gay students frequently struggle with their sexual identity and development and the range of problems and emotions associated with coming to terms with their homosexuality. This area of student development is a concern for those working with college students since 10 percent of the population is gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and faculty and college staff will certainly find themselves advising, counseling and working with students who are struggling with these issues. Theories on the development of sexual identity are reviewed and examined as they apply to the field of education. Six developmental tasks faced by lesbian and gay students are listed and discussed: "coming out"; developing a positive self-concept; developing and maintaining primary relationships; dealing with homophobia and harassment; dealing with discrimination; and dealing with rejection. A review of the literature suggests two areas needing change: faculty and college staff working with gay and lesbian students need to learn about and develop an understanding of the lifestyles and struggles of these students, and efforts need to be made to assist non-gay students, faculty and staff in dealing with homophobia. Suggestions for educating students, staff and faculty about gay and lesbian issues and for reducing homophobia are included. (BHK)

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Addressing the Developmental Issues of Lesbian and Gay College Students

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Introduction

Traditional age college students face a vast array of developmental tasks and issues. Generally defined as 18 to 25 years of age, these traditional students are bridging the gap between adolescence and adulthood. This paper will address the developmental stages and issues faced by traditional aged college students.

Lesbian and gay students, in addition to the developmental stages of non-gay students are also frequently struggling with their sexual identity and development and the range of problems and emotions associated with it. The specific focus of this paper will be on lesbian and gay college students struggling with a variety of developmental issues, their sexual orientation, and dealing with their homosexuality.

This area of student development and specific concerns will have a great impact on those who work with college students since ten percent of the population is gay, lesbian, or bisexual and late adolescence and early adulthood is the time when many lesbians and gay men come to terms with their sexual orientation and go through the process of coming out to their friends and family. Faculty and staff on a college campus will certainly find themselves advising, counseling, and working with students who are struggling with this issue.

Summary of Problem

In order to understand the specific identity struggles faced by lesbian and gay college students, it is necessary to begin with an understanding of what these students have already experienced as children and in high school because of their sexual orientation. Coleman and Remafedi (1989) described the development of sexual identity for homosexual individuals as a series of stages. They said that a person's sexual orientation is established in childhood. The first indication of homosexuality is a vague sense of differentness in childhood, and these perceptions take on sexual meanings during puberty as homosexual attractions stir. This is followed by a period of confusion before the individual adopts a homosexual label, but it can take years until the final stage of self-acceptance and integration occurs. Coleman and Remafedi described the progression as a tentative to-and-fro movement through the stages, not a steady one. During this development, the individual may waffle between homosexual, heterosexual, and bisexual labels before coming to terms with his or her sexual orientation.

Students who enter college will be at varying stages in this development. In addition to struggles with their sexual orientation, gay and lesbian students are faced with the same developmental tasks as are other college students their age. Both sets of developmental tasks interact with each other which complicates these students' developmental process even further. Many theories

exist describing student development among college students, but two in particular focus on identity development, which has the greatest interaction with the developmental struggles particular to gay and lesbian students. Erik Erikson's theory of development focuses on ego development and the emergence of one's sense of identity. In the establishment of identity, the student's interpersonal, social, cultural, and historical context all play significant roles. He emphasizes the social world as an integral aspect of development. Arthur Chickering describes development in terms of seven vectors, or central tasks, college students struggle with. They are developing competence, managing emotions, developing autonomy, establishing identity, freeing interpersonal relationships, clarifying purpose, and developing integrity (Widick, Knefelkamp, & Parker, 1980).

In describing how these sets of developmental issues interact for lesbian and gay college students, Scott (1988) stated six developmental tasks faced by lesbian and gay students which are unique to them or at least have different parameters than those faced by non-gay people: coming out, developing a positive self-concept, developing and maintaining primary relationships, dealing with homophobia and harassment, dealing with discrimination, and dealing with rejection.

Coming out is a process which can take several years. Once students accept their own sexual orientation as lesbians or gay men, they face the trauma of telling that information to their family and

friends. Because most gay men and lesbians grow up without contact with openly gay or lesbian people and their only information about homosexuality is negative and derogatory, they frequently have very negative self-concepts. As a result the task of developing a positive self-concept which all students struggle with is complicated for gay and lesbian students. Much time for many college students is spent developing and maintaining a primary relationship with another person. For lesbian and gay students, this also becomes a more difficult task, because their relationships are not encouraged or even condoned by many people in our society. In addition they must learn to deal with homophobia and harassment which is present everywhere around them, whether they have come out or not. For those who have come out, the struggles of discrimination are frequent on many college campuses. Finally those students who do reveal their sexual orientation take a great risk that they will be condemned or rejected by family and friends. In addition to these six developmental struggles, lesbian and gay students must deal with many legal issues as well as AIDS and other health issues not faced as frequently by non-gay students (Scott, 1988).

As Scott described, one of the most difficult, yet very important, tasks for gay and lesbian students is developing a positive self-concept. Ritter and O'Neill (1989) described this process in terms of achieving personal and spiritual wholeness. They discussed how, for gay men and lesbians, traditional religion undermines the four

areas to which it generally brings comfort and spiritual wholeness for other people. First religions profess to be philosophically reasonable. While on one hand two of the basic principles of the Judeo-Christian traditions are the goodness of each human being and the unconditional love of the Creator for each person, on the other hand these principles do not always seem to apply to gay and lesbian people. This does not follow to be philosophically reasonable. Second religions are assumed to be morally helpful. But for lesbians and gay men, most traditional religions consider their sexual orientation unnatural and prohibit their intimate and sexual relationships on the grounds that it is morally wrong. Gay and lesbian people also find traditional religions lacking in spiritual illumination because they do not present gay or lesbian role models within the church or many examples of same sex love and friendship relationships. Finally traditional religions have not proven to be communally supportive of their gay and lesbian members.

Another important aspect of college life is career planning. Hetherington and Orzek (1989) discussed how development of the lesbian identity and career planning interact. The problems with continued discrimination against lesbian women and gay men severely limit their career opportunities. This adds yet another struggle for these students to deal with.

Summary of Treatment

Two general areas of treatment surfaced in the literature. First, the need for faculty and staff working with gay and lesbian college students to learn about and develop an understanding for the lifestyle and struggles of these students. In order to assist the students in dealing with the many issues identified above and help the students work through them, counselors, faculty, and student affairs professional need to come to terms with their own homophobia and learn as much as possible about the subject (Scott, 1988).

Second efforts must be made to assist non-gay students, faculty, and staff in dealing with their homophobia in order to create a campus environment which is supportive of lesbian and gay students, faculty, and staff. Scott (1988) suggests both improvements to the campus environment and programs to assist gay and lesbian students in dealing with their sexual orientation. Changes in campus environment includes institutional policies, personnel attitudes, and harassment. Possible programs include lectures and films, campus leaders' education, and reading room offerings. These changes can help in two ways: by showing gay and lesbian students that their lifestyle is OK and by educating others on the homosexual lifestyle in order to reduce homophobia, harassment, discrimination, and rejection.

The attitudes of other students on campus can have an incredible effect on gay and lesbian students and their level of comfort

on campus. This is especially true with those students who are in helping roles and positions of responsibility such as resident assistants. In a study of resident assistant candidates, D'Augelli (1989) found a fairly high level of negative attitudes and lack of knowledge about lesbian and gay issues and lifestyles, especially among male students. He suggests greater personal exposure to lesbian and gay students and education about their lifestyle and the additional issues and struggles they face in order to reduce the anxiety of these resident assistants so that they can better assist their residents with these concerns.

D'Emilio (1990) identified seven areas that need attention: reducing harassment in residence halls; student affairs programming to foster toleration, understanding, and enthusiasm for differences in culture and identity; sensitivity to lesbian and gay students' additional struggles and stresses in order to foster self-acceptance rather than reinforce self-hatred; hiring an ombudsperson for gay and lesbian concerns; the need for the highest university officials to exercise full authority in condemning hate incidents; banning institutions and organizations that engage in discrimination, such as ROTC, from campus; and conducting research to gain further understanding about sexual orientation and gay and lesbian issues.

A study group at the University of Maine-Farmington organizes and implements a variety of activities on their campus to educate

students, staff, and faculty about gay and lesbian issues and reduce homophobia. Some examples of their activities include a monthly tabloid distributed on campus with written material by gay and lesbian students; overhead message boards with thought provoking statements, questions, and challenges against discrimination; candidly addressing lesbian and gay issues in letters to students before summer orientation and during quarter breaks; staff development; guest speakers in classes; and written assignments on homosexual topics in freshman English classes (Geller, 1991).

Summary

As found in the literature, developmental issues for lesbian and gay college students can be very traumatic. At the same time gay and lesbian students must deal with their sexual orientation and all the struggles and problems associated with it, they are also faced with the same general developmental tasks as other college students. These developmental issues interact and influence each other, making both more complicated for the students. As with all developmental issues, each individual must deal with and work through them at her or his own pace and with her or his own strength, but there are ways that others can help and support the person through the difficult times.

As suggested in the literature, college faculty and staff who work with lesbian and gay students may be able to assist these individuals in dealing with their sexual identity struggles through

concern and support. It is also important for them to influence and change campus policies and the campus environment and to implement programs to provide information and resources to assist gay and lesbian students in their development, as well as assist non-gay students in dealing with their homophobia.

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